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THE STANDARD OF AMERICAN SPEECH¹

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Mr. Henry James somewhere remarks that the reason why English society is so superior to American society is that in England there is always something to go on to. By this cryptic phrase he means—if I understand him—that, whereas an American is limited in his social contacts to the dull round of democratic equality, an Englishman has the opportunity of passing from a lower social stage to a higher, going on in the course of a single evening from gatherings of his despised equals to functions that are quite obviously superior—functions graced by aristocracy and perhaps even by royalty.

This peculiar view of the inferiority of American society is not, I imagine, shared by any great number of Americans; but, curiously enough, a view of American speech exactly parallel to it is, both in this country and in England, well-nigh universal. I mean that almost every one who touches upon American speech assumes that it is inferior to British speech. Just as the Englishman, having endured for a time the society of his equals, goes on to bask in the sunshine of aristocracy, so the American, when he has used the American language for business or for familiar intercourse, may then, for higher or more serious purposes, go on to the aristocratic or royal language of Great Britain.

¹ Read at the meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in New York City, December 1, 1916.

Thus, to take the first example that comes to hand, when Mr. Rudyard Kipling, in one of his minor poems, speaks of the American as "a brother hedged with alien speech," he means us to understand that linguistically the American is on the wrong side of the hedge. In other words, American English, in Mr. Kipling's view, is not only an alien speech but a degraded speech. English is spoken as it should be spoken only in Great Britain. American English is a provincial or barbarous English which some day, when we are more civilized, we shall be compelled to unlearn.

That an Englishman should take this view of his native speech is only natural, and if we regard it merely as an article of the British constitution we need pay no further attention to it. But, unfortunately, our English brothers sometimes attempt to support their dogmas by reasons, and these reasons are often too absurd or too irritating to be passed by in silence. A characteristic illustration of such an attempt may be found in a paper by a Mr. H. Thurston, which appeared some little time ago in the *Nineteenth Century*. Mr. Thurston's point is, that whereas in England all educated Englishmen speak alike, in America we speak all sorts of tongues. In one of Mr. Howells' novels, for example, he finds a heroine from New York who says "moybid" for "morbidity," and a hero from Virginia who says "toned" for "turned." From Henry James's *Bostonians* he takes the following passage: "He came from Mississippi and he spoke very perceptibly with the accent of that country. He prolonged his consonants and swallowed his vowels. He was guilty of elisions and interpolations which were equally unexpected." Differences in speech such as these, Mr. Thurston goes on to say, are unknown in the United Kingdom among cultivated people. "A novelist on this side of the water having told us that his heroine is English, has practically nothing more to say about the way she talks. She talks—English."

In brief, according to this writer, since there is but one standard of speech in England as against no standard in America, an American who wishes to speak the best English must take his pronunciation from the mother-country.

Deferring for a moment the question of a single standard of speech in America, let us ask whether it is true that all cultured

Englishmen speak alike. I think I may appeal to the experience of everyone who has ever been in England, or has even listened to the speech of Englishmen, to bear me out in saying that they do not. What one finds if he examines impartially the English of the United Kingdom is, first, a large number of dialects, many of them unintelligible to Americans, and, I suspect, to Englishmen also; and secondly, four or five leading types of expression which rise to the dignity of national speech. Of the latter, some are easily apprehended by Americans; some are not.

At a meeting in London University several years ago I had the pleasure of listening to speeches by eight well-known Englishmen. All used English, and good English too, but, phonetically regarded, there was as great a difference between the speech, say, of Mr. W. T. Stead and that of Sir John Cockburn as could be heard on any university platform in America. Mr. Stead spoke precisely like an American from the Middle West—he might have been born in Chicago. The others spoke an unmistakable British, though all were easily intelligible.

To illustrate the more difficult types of British speech, I will give one or two personal experiences. I remember once sitting by the side of an eagerly conversing couple in the Dresden Art Gallery for full twenty minutes without guessing their nationality until the exclamation, "Just fawncy!" revealed that they were speaking English, or at least Londonese. A more recent experience was with a young Dutch girl in one of the schools of The Hague, who had acquired a correct and fluent English by several years' residence in a British boarding-school. It is no exaggeration to say that until I got the hang of her pronunciation, if I may put it so, I understood her Dutch better than her English. I recall one phrase which completely baffled me. It was "mawxstrawnry." After she had repeated it several times at my request, I had her write it down, whereupon it resolved itself into "more extraordinary," as I should pronounce it. I may add that she found my American equally difficult.

If I may trust my own ears, the differences in English speech are as great as the differences in American speech. True, the items of difference are not the same, and they may be subtler, but they

exist none the less, and, as Mr. Bernard Shaw has intimated in his *Pygmalion*, they are patent to anyone who will train himself to appreciate them. If they have not as yet been commented upon by British novelists, the fault is with the novelists themselves, not in the lack of material offered by their characters. Setting aside purely dialectical differences, one may hear in the speech of educated Londoners such variants as the following: "which, wich; excursion, ixcursion, ixcushion; for, faw; here, he'uh, hyah; idea, idear; office, orfice; porter, pawtuh; yourself, youself, yeh'self; stop, stawp; round, rah'oond, reh'oond; door, dawr, daw, doh'uh"; and many more besides, some of which, if spelled in phonetic symbols, would be quite as ridiculous as the "moybid" of New Yorkers or the "toned" of Virginians.

It may be said, as Mr. Thurston implies, that these are vagaries of the individual, whereas the differences in American speech are generic. So be it. But in this connection one may recall that Scotland, Ireland, and Wales are essential parts of the United Kingdom and as such are entitled to a voice, both literally and figuratively, in deciding questions of the King's English. To draw the suggested parallel, does not our Southern speech (or Northern speech, if the South prefers) have its counterpart in the pleasing and unmistakable accent of Scotchmen or Irishmen, and is not one just as good English as the other?

In fine, the idea that somewhere, in some linguistic British Utopia, there exists a standard English which all cultured Englishmen use alike and cannot help but use, and to which distracted Americans may resort for chastening and absolution, is a pleasing hallucination, which a single glance into Mr. Henry Sweet's *Primer of Spoken English* should have dissipated forever. Not only does good English vary in different parts of the United Kingdom, but, as I shall point out later, it owes no small part of its goodness, that is, its interest and charm, to these same variations.

Turning now to our own country, we may concede at once that Americans, like Englishmen, speak a various language. Perhaps I can best introduce this phase of my subject by quoting from a letter that I received not long ago from a Western business man:

I have noticed in traveling about the country a good many differences in the pronunciation of common words. The word I call "hot," the New

Englander pronounces "hawt" or something like that. On the other hand, what I term a "hog," or perhaps I ought to spell it "hawg," some persons speak of as a "hahg." Once I was fond of the word "isolate" and used it whenever I had a chance, but so many persons nowadays say "ice-olate" that I have dropped it. What I refer to as a *combine* some of my customers, who are pretty well-educated men, call a *combine*. Then there is "Chicago." Half the people I meet in the cars are going to "Chicawgo" and the other half to "Chicahgo." Now what I want to know is whether there is any right or wrong about this matter of pronunciation. If one way is right, why don't we all pronounce that way and compel the other fellow to do the same? If there isn't any right or wrong, why do some persons make so much fuss about it?

And he adds in a postscript, "Which do you say—neether or nither?"

To the last question one would prefer to reply as the Irishman did, "nayther," and so escape the troublesome question altogether. However, the general principles involved are too interesting and too important to be lightly put aside. If American speech has a right and a wrong, we ought to find them out, and, having done so, shun the one and cleave to the other.

Time was when the pronunciation of New England was thought to be superior to that of the rest of the country. The man who said "Dawschestuh" and "idear" was felt to belong to a higher intellectual stratum than the man who said "Dorchester" and "idea." A great many persons in the West, feeling a little ashamed of their provincial speech, cultivated the New England pronunciation and learned in course of time to give a pretty fair imitation of it. But speech habits acquired thus late in life are somewhat difficult to maintain, and so persons who put on these false ornaments are very likely to drop them in moments of excitement. There is a well-known public speaker, born in the Middle West, who at the beginning of his speech, when he is on his dignity and a trifle self-conscious, always says "pleasuh" and "feachah" and "chahming," but, as soon as he has warmed up sounds his *r*'s as plainly as he does his *p*'s and *q*'s.

This superstition, however, is virtually dead. The persons who use the New England pronunciation are relatively so few in number that they may almost be said to speak a special dialect. The aristocratic period has passed and we are now on a thoroughly democratic basis. Hoosier and Wolverine and Badger and Sucker

may hold up their heads when they use their native vowels, and the southerners, who have always been justly proud of their beautiful speech, need no longer take the trouble even to defend it.

Speaking at large, we may say that in this country, as in England, there is no standard of pronunciation that is universally recognized, the dictionaries to the contrary notwithstanding. If any considerable body of educated Americans in any part of the country is using seriously a peculiar form of English for transacting the business of life, that form of English is good American and has a chance of becoming our national speech. Its chances are specially good if it is racy, rich in vocabulary, and is used by a large number of representative and gifted citizens.

Which of the various pronunciations cited by my correspondent will, in the fulness of time, drive out the others it is now impossible to say. Perhaps neither "hahg" nor "hawg" will win in the contest, but something half-way between the two. Meanwhile, all are alike good. The Missourian has a perfect right to tell the caviling critics of his pronunciation that they "gotta quit kickin' his dawg aroun'." Whatever may be said of "gotta," "kickin'," and "aroun'," the "dawg" in the democratic aristocracy of American speech is entitled to an honorable place.

The situation in this country, we may conclude, is not very different from that in Great Britain. We have here, as they have there, a variety of dialects, no one of which rises to the dignity of a universal medium. We have here, as they have there, several types of national speech, akin to the dialects, struggling for ascendancy; but we have no means of knowing which will ultimately prevail, if any one of them ever does prevail.

It may seem to some persons who have always thought of language as governed by rather rigorous laws that a doctrine of this sort tends to a condition, not of democracy, but of anarchy, that it throws the doors open to all manner of degraded pronunciations and leads ultimately to linguistic chaos. It must be remembered, however, that what are called the laws of good English are after all only the observed uniformities in the serious speech of large bodies of intelligent and cultured users of the language. The purpose of dictionaries is just to record such uni-

formities. As soon as a degraded pronunciation is used seriously by a sufficiently large number of educated persons it ceases to be degraded and becomes one of the nobility—if a democracy may be said to admit of a nobility.

An interesting example of this elevation of a word is seen in the expression, "an apron." Originally, this was written "a napron," but through carelessness the sound of the *n* was transferred from the noun to the article, and the word "napron" was thus, in popular speech, transformed into "apron." Here was a distinct case of carelessness and degradation. Nevertheless the word passed into common use and in course of time actually drove the older word out of the vocabulary.

But in other similar cases a degraded form, although apparently as fit for survival as the word "apron," has failed to establish itself. Every year, for example, hundreds of thousands of American children create for themselves the words "napple" and "nour." There is a period in the life of almost every American child, I suppose, when he says "Ain't these napples good?" or, "Teacher kept me in for two nour." Nevertheless these terms have not as yet risen above the childish vocabulary.

Are we forced then to abandon the idea of a standard of American speech? Yes and no. The idea of a fixed standard to be settled arbitrarily once and for all by some authority or set of authorities may be abandoned summarily. It is untenable, both in theory and practice. To be sure, some of our expansive orators look forward to a time when all the people of the world shall speak the same language in the same way, and perhaps they are true prophets. But, for my part, if this simplification is ever to come, I am glad that it has not come in my day. A world in which everybody used the same words and language forms would be a much more monotonous, a much less interesting world, than the one we live in. There are adventures of the spirit and of the intellect as well as of the body, and one of the most fascinating as well as the most invigorating of them is the tackling of a foreign language. Fortunately such adventures are likely to be open to posterity long after the fastnesses of the earth have become common-places of travel. It is of the essence of language to change. No

power can stay it. If by some miraculous intervention all the inhabitants of the world could at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon be made to speak exactly alike, it would not be twenty-four hours before differences would begin to make themselves apparent. Variations in types of character, in daily needs, in attitudes toward life, and nature, and society would bring about rapid variations in the mode of expression, and unless we are to conceive of the whole world as drowned in sloth or in brotherly love, competition and rivalry would soon give one set of variations precedence over the others, so that after a few generations the one language would break up into divergent dialects and ultimately into diverging languages.

What is true of different races and countries is true also, though in a milder way, of different sections of the same country. There is no nation, so far as I am aware, in which all the citizens or even all the educated citizens use precisely the same speech. Compare the German of Berlin with the German of Munich, the Italian of Naples with the Italian of Florence, the Russian of Odessa with the Russian of Petrograd. And just as the world is more interesting and more intellectually alluring because of the existence of foreign languages, so our national life is more interesting, more livable, and more amusing because of the sectional differences of American speech.

I am prepared to hear dissent from this view. Indeed, it has been seriously proposed in Great Britain that all English speech should be made to conform to a model. I believe the speech of Mr. Forbes-Robertson was selected as the norm. By means of graphophone plates, assisted perhaps by legislative enactment, the enunciation of the distinguished actor was to be enforced on the younger generation and thus perpetuated through all time. I grant at once that Mr. Forbes-Robertson's speech is admirable—in the mouth of a Forbes-Robertson—but a nation of Forbes-Robertsons, a Forbes-Robertson in the butcher shop, asking will you have ham or bacon? a Forbes-Robertson at the bank window protesting that you must be identified, a Forbes-Robertson behind the hotel register—but no, the imagination balks. A nation of Forbes-Robertsons would be as intolerable as a diet of partridges.

But to say this is not to abandon entirely the quest for a standard. If the idea of a fixed standard is put aside, there still remains a touchstone of a wholly different kind to which we may turn with full confidence. Perhaps the clearest and simplest formulation of it is that of Walt Whitman in his *American Primer*. Says Whitman:

The subtle charm of beautiful pronunciation is not in dictionaries, grammars, marks of accent, formulas of a language, or in any laws or rules. The charm of the beautiful pronunciation of all words, of all tongues, is in perfect flexible vocal organs and in a developed harmonious soul. All words spoken from these have deeper, sweeter sounds, new meanings, impossible on any less terms. Such meanings, such sounds, continually wait in every word that exists—in these words—perhaps slumbering through years, closed from all tympani of temples, lips, brains, until that comes which has the quality patiently waiting in the words.

If this doctrine is true, the stuff out of which a great national language is created is the simple, homely expression of sincere feeling and sturdy thinking. Live nobly, think good thoughts, have right feelings, be genuine, do not scream or strain or make pretense, cultivate a harmonious soul—follow these injunctions, and you are laying the foundation of a standard American speech. Whence the speech comes does not matter. It may be the language of Potash and Perlmutter. It may be composed of all the dialects spoken in Chicago or in San Francisco. It may be the speech of Boston, of Texas, or of Montana. No matter. If it is the voice of high wisdom, of moderation, of human nature at its best, the words will take on that power and charm which is the test of a great national speech.

To my mind, the speech of Abe and Mawruss, as reported by Montague Glass, might easily prove the beginning of a type of standard English. It is kindly, natural, unaffected; whereas the speech of a Billy Sunday, with its rant, its pretense, its vulgarity, its sensationalism, and its orgiastic appeal, is, to me at any rate, the language of degeneracy, rivaled only by that of the colored supplements of our daily newspapers. There is a greater peril to American speech in these abnormal types than in all the dialects of the melting-pot.

But while there is no dialect form, nor, indeed, any kind or combination of vocal sounds which may not conceivably become

an element of our national speech, we may yet distinguish between an unkempt speech and what may be called a "tidy" speech. There is a kind of ungainly utterance which goes with slovenly thinking and ill-regulated feeling that offends, and properly offends, those whom Plato calls "lovers of discourse." Against this we must set our faces like iron. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the sense for tidiness of speech is confined to the educated. A feeling for the nice organization of verbal utterance may frequently be detected among the unlettered. I have recently heard an anecdote which aptly illustrates one phase of this inherent language-sense. A city man who was traveling in the Kentucky mountain region stopped at a farmhouse and asked for food. The woman of the house hesitated a moment, and then replied that she had nothing fit to eat. "Oh, I can eat anything," responded the traveler; "haven't you some cornbread?" The woman's face lighted up. "Oh, if cawnbread's all you want, come right in. Why, cawnbread's just what I ain't got nuthin else on hand but." Not even the German, pursuing relentlessly his separable particle, has a stronger grip on syntax than had that unlettered woman. I believe that such a language-sense is widely distributed throughout the elements which compose our motley population. On this alone one might build the structure of a cogent, logical, well-knit language.

Whatever impression these remarks may have created, I trust I have made one point clear, and that is that when we deal with American speech we shall do well to cultivate the virtue of tolerance. It is clearly not our business to force upon the younger generation the speech of any particular section of the country, or to do them to death for want of well pronouncing shibboleth. The speech of one's own community, the speech which one hears day by day at home and on the street, is the speech which, in modified form, one will probably use all one's life long. If, as a child, I say "gläss" and "päst," I shall in all likelihood continue to do so in old age. And why not? The vowel sound in "gläss" is just as good as that in "glahss," or as the intermediate sound which, in my boyhood, teachers vainly attempted to acquire and to impose on their pupils.

But, on the other hand, such speech as the child uses he must be helped to use effectively. To this end the influences which lead to cheap thinking and disorderly feeling, and so to slovenly or bombastic or affected speaking, must be traced to their sources and, as far as possible, counteracted. Thus may be brought about in the pupil that harmony of soul of which Whitman speaks, without which flexibility of the vocal organs is a sham and a nuisance. In this, as in all other kinds of education, the letter means nothing unless the spirit gives it life.

Finally, American speech is not a degraded or plebeian form of British speech—it is a vigorous, hardy offshoot that is gradually assuming a form appropriate to our character and daily needs. It will grow as the nation grows, and its divergence from British English will correspond to the divergence of this nation from the mother-country in character, modes of thought, and social custom. We need not expect that all Americans will ever speak alike; probably there will always be at least three main types of speech which, by the extent and distinction of their use, will rise above the grade of dialects. If they become standard or prevailing types, it will be because they are found to express better than other modes of speech the thoughts and feelings of the entire nation, especially as these are voiced by men of genius and leaders of thought. The best American speech of any period will be that which, with least strain or affectation or waste of effort, gives adequate utterance to the best that is in the American character.